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AUTHOR Barden, Meg
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a model of an after-school program for low-income suburban children of different ages (3-14 years). Housed in an industrial park, the program serves the children of both working and non-working parents and accepts into the program all children who apply for whom funding can be found. (This includes non-English speaking children and children with special needs.) The physical environment was planned, arranged, and often built by the children themselves, with expert assistance from adults. Three activities occur every day of the program: dramatic play, child-adult conversation (particularly about things that trouble the children), and inter-age group activities. Some problems associated with conducting such a program are discussed. (Author/MP)

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From Heaven to Earth: The Story of Three Years in an After-School Center in an Industrial Park

Meg Barden

Lecturer in Early Childhood Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts

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This model of after school care is not unique in its foundations. Like most program models it came into being through a happy mixing of the founder's philosophy, the particular needs of the community it served, and the environment in which the program actually took place. Some similar mixture must be the basis of all programs which get beyond the planning stage. There never should be an exact recipe. Founders' philosophies vary, as do community needs and available environments. Thus, the mixture of these three ingredients will always produce a unique program.

If there is anything that can be copied about the foundations of this particular model, it is the belief, on the part of the founders, that the program should meet the developmental and societal needs of the children and their families. We saw the children and their familes as the important variable, and tried to plan a program and an environment to fit their needs wherever possible, rather than trying to fit children into a preconceived program or setting.

The program was unique in the following ways:

- It provided after-school care in one large room for children ages 3 to 14.
- It was housed in a warehouse in an industrial park.
- It served both working and non-working parents.
- It accepted all children who applied, for whom funding could be found. This included non-English speaking children and children with special needs.
- The physical environment was planned, arranged and often built by the children themselves, with expert assistance from adults.
- The program model attempted to bring children into contact with adult work places whenever appropriate.

It is hoped that the following description of the program will allow the reader to distill some of the essential elements which go into any healthy, productive after-school program, and at the same time allow identification of those features of the program that may be specific to industrial parks, or to low-income, suburban communities like the one in which it was located.

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First, it is necessary to look at the children, their homes and their community. If we pretend to be a friendly, curious giant who has temporarily removed the roofs of houses, schools, office buildings, stores, and factories in the suburban city where the program was initiated, this is what would be seen if we looked down on weekday afternoons: The people would be grouped mostly according to age and size and often according to sex. Adult men and women would be busy in factories, offices and stores. Usually there would be more men in offices and more women in stores; the men's offices would tend to be bigger than the women's offices. Depending on the nature of the factory its workers would be predominantly men or women. The giant would note some small children in the stores shopping with their mothers, and some older children buying sweets of one kind or another as an after-school treat. A few children would remain in the schools to be tutored, or to participate in a particular after-school activity, or be detained as punishment for undesirable behavior. Others would be at the library or at special schools for dancing, music and gymnastics. Some, depending on the weather, would be at parks playing ball, swinging, sliding, running, shouting. Children under five would be at day care centers, or in their own or neighbors' homes or yards. Children of elementary school age would also be at home, but not always with an adult in the house.

A closer look by the giant, to discover what the children were doing in their homes, would reveal that most of the older children (ages twelve to fourteen) and many of the younger ones were lying, sprawling or sitting in front of a box which had an ever changing picture flashing from one side. Children would be seen watching all afternoon with short breaks for refreshments or arguments over which program to watch. Many children would stay there from the time school ended until supper. Some would eat their supper with eyes glued to the box.

The scene viewed by our hypothetical giant was the after-school situation at the home site of the program, and in most small cities and suburbs during the early seventies when this after-school center opened. The situation would differ somewhat in rural places where the adults might be in the fields and woods, and the children more isolated except for the time spent on buses. A survey of parents of children enrolled in the two nearby elementary schools and one parochial school had indicated: 1) that there were many children whose parents worked, or would like to work, but who had no one to care for their children after school hours; and 2) that even in situations in which parents were at home, the children felt they had nothing to do except watch television. Since it is estimated that American children will watch 15,000 hours of TV before they are eighteen, one can be reasonably certain today that passive viewing of an often unreal world is frequently substituting for active participation in the real world of the child's community.

The research and development firm that originally sponsored the After-School Center is in an industrial park which lies midway between two public schools, one of which has a Title I program, an indication that there is a sizable population of families of low socioeconomic status. The homes are mostly modest single-family dwellings. A few apartments and tenements are scattered among the stores on the main streets. The area is

predominantly Italian; so many parents and grandparents are unable to speak English that one school sends home communication in both Italian and English.

There are meagerly equipped parks near the two schools. A Boys' Club provides some recreation programs, but little is available for girls. There is a small branch library. The major streets are so filled with traffic that they are a deterrent to young children who might otherwise go to parks and the library unaccompanied.

The sponsor of our program (a euphemism for the group, firm, school, club, settlement house or other social agency that acquires funds for the program, dispenses them, and either plans the program or hires someone to plan it) is housed in remodeled, old brick buildings at one end of a long industrial park. The people work in small but comfortable offices, situated on three floors. As in the rest of the city, the biggest offices are occupied by men, while some women (secretaries) work grouped fairly closely together in larger rooms. Telephones ring, people have conferences, reports are written, curriculum is designed, movies are made. Most of what is happening is related to the education of children or college students, but there are no children or college students to be seen.

Like many other research and development firms previously involved in developing programs or products for children, this firm became interested in day care in the early 1970s. It was expected that with the passage of the Mondale Bill there would be funds available for day care, and firms "geared up" for this possibility. Recognizing that one of the ways to develop expertise in the day care field is to operate a center, our firm gave birth to a child care project. The birth took place, not because a business saw child care as a need for its employees or the community, but rather because they hoped to use it as a vehicle for obtaining federal funds. Of course they could not open a center if one was not needed: thus a survey was made of the parents who worked at the firm and of the nearby community families. The survey revealed a strong need for day care of all kinds. When State Office for Children funds became available for a short period (three months) it was decided to start an after-school program first, since the survey had revealed a particular need for such a service. In this city, schools close at noon on Tuesday and Thursday, which is a delight to the children, a planning time for teachers, but a nightmare for working mothers.

Once the needs survey was complete, how did we, as planners, begin? First, we tried to remind ourselves of the nature of school-age children -- what they like to do and what their problems and feelings are. We read books about them, watched them when they were unsupervised in parks, on the streets, or in their own yards, and we made home visits -- both to recruit and to find out about their families. Our observations and reading convinced us that most elementary school children need the following: 1) a parent or other friendly adult to talk to when they wish; 2) activities which will keep them away from the unreal TV world for most of the afternoon; and 3) space and materials which they can use themselves without many restrictions. We discovered from our observations that if the above were provided, children appeared well able to take care of them-

selves. They involved themselves in learning, relaxation, exercise, introspection, and social decisions. Unfortunately they also engaged in some less desirable activities involving fighting, cruelty and vandalism.

We also noticed that the children slipped naturally from big groups (ball games, hide and seek) to more intimate smaller groups, such as the one I overheard in a back yard. Here, three children, probably eight or nine years old, spontaneously acted out dramatic scenes. For a while the sandbox became a ship. "Where are we going?" asked one boy. The reply from the leader was, "To America, of course!" (I never learned whether he was Columbus, John Smith or Sir Walter Raleigh, but clearly he was acting out some of his school learning with no prodding from adults.) This small group might break down still further as individual children would wander off by themselves to their homes to read or watch TV or finish homework or would simply kick a stone somewhat aimlessly down the street. Sometimes big kids "beat up" little kids. Sometime big kids were protective, or even helpful and nurturing with smaller children. Usually boys played with boys and girls with girls -- but not always.

Watching and analyzing these various activities and groupings, we concluded that given a safe, not too sterile environment and an adult nearby, most school-age children spontaneously plan a good after-school program. They not only vary the size of the group to meet their particular needs but alternate big muscle activities with quieter intellectual pursuits. They find social satisfaction in both small and large groups, but are also able to find things to do as individuals. That doesn't mean that we didn't also observe lonely children, emotionally disturbed children, or frightened children. In general, however, the children we observed seemed to cope well with their own lives.

Having found what children could do for themselves we had to find the best kind of adult interaction or non-interaction to let them continue to do it, and to include those children not so adept at self regulation. We also had to find the type of environment that would best support good after-school afternoon and vacation experiences for six to fourteen year olds.

In addition to providing a good program, the right kind of adult interaction, and a good place to bring this about, we were concerned with some aspects of American life that we wanted to change, or at least to start changing. This was long before the Carnegie Commission reported that, because of poverty, "One child out of four in America is being actively harmed by a 'stacked deck' created by the failings of our society."[1] But we were already aware of America's problems. The 1970 White House Conference had characterized America's families and their children as being in a state of trouble and neglect "so deep and pervasive as to threaten the future of the nation."[2] Urie Bronfenbrenner at Cornell, among others, was writing about alienation of children from their parents, community and the world of work.[3] Bronfenbrenner further quoted the report of the White House Conference on Children: "In today's world parents find themselves at the mercy of a society which imposes pressures and priorities that allow neither time nor place for meaningful activities and relations between children and adults, which downgrade the role of

parents and the functions of parenthood, and which prevent the parent from doing things he wants to do as a guide, friend and companion to his children. . . ."[4] Bronfenbrenner ended this article with "a proposal for nothing more radical than providing a setting in which young and old can simply sit and talk. . . ."[5] We decided such a place must be included in our plans.

Our observations of children both within and outside the after-school program, coupled with our readings about school-age children and the state of the American family in the seventies, led us to formulate the following philosophy and rationale:

1. Because there is a growing alienation of children and youth in American society, children need the opportunity to interact with children of different ages and with adults.

2. Because we profess to be a democratic society, not an authoritarian one, the developmental needs of children and their social community needs must always be considered in planning programs for them.

3. Because children and families have been much neglected in our society, we must halt the results of this neglect, insofar as we can, by listening to and learning from the children. After-school care staff must constantly determine children's needs by observing their actions and listening to what they have to say.

The task ahead of us was now defined. We needed a place where young and old could meet; we needed skilled staff who could maximize the children's abilities to spend their afternoons fruitfully; and we needed a program in which destructive elements could be dealt with and, hopefully, minimized. Our needs were met when a large warehouse room adjacent to the firm was made available. Staff knowledgeable about elementary school-age children were hired and readily agreed that the children themselves should prepare the room and design the program.

The first week about twelve children, ranging in age from six to fourteen, happily scrubbed walls, swept old carpets, moved a few pieces of donated furniture, and made fantastic plans about what they wanted to do with the space. They were so enchanted with this room of their own that they called it "Building Paradise." Enrollment rapidly grew to twenty children.

Cleaning accomplished, the children unanimously declared they would like a loft in the middle of the room. We complied with their wish and a graduate student from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology contributed his know-how in helping them design and build the structure. The loft was used throughout the four years of the program for a myriad of purposes few of the the adults envisioned at the start: a hiding place (to get away from kids or to get away from adults); a building place (doors, windows, screens, etc., were added or subtracted from time to time); a decorating space (drapes were hung, posts were painted and pictures were placed on the walls). Of course, most of all it was a dramatic play space.

The loft, either the raised floor or the space beneath, became a fishing wharf, a kitchen, a stage, a detective agency, a store, a psychiatrist's office, a haven for the girls to get away from the boys, a haven for the boys to get away from the girls, a place where big kids kept the little kids out, and less frequently a place where the little kids kept the big kids out. In retrospect, I am sorry that I didn't keep a daily journal just on the uses of the space. The warehouse room and the loft truly belonged to the children. No principal nor janitor nor educational director decided on use of the room and loft. Only the children, with the aid of sympathetic and respectful adults, made decisions regarding these areas.

As the program grew we felt the need to divide the room into activity areas which would provide better work spaces. A carpenter, with help from the children, built a counter and shelf space near the donated stove. Cooking was always a favorite activity. Woodworking was a close second, so we built a work bench and a place to store tools. Next in popularity were arts and crafts materials. Here we found that people skilled in arts and crafts were as important to children of this age as those who were knowledgeable about their developmental needs.

The children wanted to be able to build real things that would not come apart. They wanted to learn craft techniques -- macrame, mural painting, pottery, and the like. We hired a professional artist as a staff member. Fathers who worked on the city maintenance staff were our best source of lumber and carpentry know how. Crafts people from various other projects at the firm taught children how to weave, take pictures and develop prints. Singing was popular whenever we had a singing staff member. One of the janitors in the industrial park liked this activity too, and would often join us.

Three activities occurred every day of the program. Costing virtually nothing, they were rarely planned, but because they were constantly included they must have been essential for the children. One was dramatic play. Another was a chance for children to talk to adults, particularly about things that were troubling them. The third I will name as I describe it below.

The importance of dramatic play was brought to our attention by a particular group of children. Included in our program, and in many after-school programs that are not selective in enrollments, were many children with only a mother in the home, a few children who were known to be troublemakers at school and one child who had been abused by her mother. These children with problems particularly need to act out their feelings -- sometimes in socially acceptable ways, sometimes not. The favorite afternoon activity for the abused child, who had spent many hours visiting with counselors and social workers, was to play Doctor's Office. She would set up an inner office under the loft, and take on the role of the Doctor. In front of her office was a receptionist's desk usually presided over by a younger child, who had been convinced by the "Doctor" that "receptionist" was an important task. The "Doctor" would then drum up business by asking children and staff to bring their problems to her. Often she got real problems. A visiting parent asked for help to stop smoking; an eleven year old boy complained that his mother wouldn't let him see his father.

Not all dramatic play was as constructive or as therapeutic. There were monsters and super-heroes and continuations of neighborhood family arguments. But there was an obvious need, every day, for some children to have time and a place to act out strong feelings. Regimented programs of recreational activities rarely allow for this. We felt that props, place, time, and space for this sort of activity were essential to allow for its fulfillment.

The second activity -- adult-child conversation -- was explicitly initiated by the children themselves. When we began planning the program, we had in mind children ages six through twelve. In interviewing parents we discovered they were particularly concerned about their Junior High School age children. We consequently decided to extend the age range to fourteen. (When these participants became ninth graders, we invited them to become aides, and in some instances, we were able to pay them through high school work study programs.) It was the older girls who first asked us if they could talk to us. With their favorite staff member, in a private place, they would talk about sex, their relationships with their parents, and neighborhood feuds. These were hard topics for the staff to deal with. But we tried. Just as with dramatic play, the need for serious conversation, especially among the older children, seemed insatiable.

We had set the stage for the third activity. We were not, however, prepared for the amount of time and intensity with which it was pursued. I guess it should be called "relating to other age groups." We had decided from the start not to group children according to age or sex. Thus we did invite this activity. It manifested itself in many ways. As one would expect, the older girls often wanted to help with the younger children. (I should add here that after about three weeks in operation, two parents asked us to take younger siblings -- age four. We lowered our age range to meet the families' needs, and never regretted it.) The older girls at other times wanted to tease them or manipulate them. Family loyalties were exceptionally strong among the children. If an older child insulted someone's younger sibling, this was almost bound to result in a fight. Sometimes temporary places were built to "keep the little kids out." But invariably, when a bigger child was a builder and had a younger sibling, an exception was made for that sibling. Most older children enjoyed "teaching" something to younger children -- songs, craft skills, cooking. We also found that the emotionally disturbed youngsters were most drawn to the physically handicapped. Our most difficult to handle eight year old boy became a tender compassionate teacher when he tried to teach a child with cerebral palsy how to climb a ladder. For a while we had a six year old mentally retarded child. The older children would beg us for a turn to "play" with him so they could try to teach him a word or a skill. I am convinced that these three activities would not have arisen, nor proven so important to the children, if we had not decided at the start to mix age groups.

What about our plan to introduce children to the adult world of work, and to the community in which they lived? Here, we were only partially successful. Project heads at the firm always said they would cooperate in inviting children to their offices, but most busy program directors under-

standably do not want children in the office when deadlines for proposals or reports are approaching. For the most part, the more routine the job that the adult was doing, the more that adult welcomed having children participate. The man who delivered the mail, a grandfatherly type, was delighted to have a child go with him, and the children loved going. The secretaries let the children photocopy, collate and staple. The janitor, as I mentioned before, joined us for singing. Parents who were staff often came over for lunch or snacks. Some of the other industries in the park let us tour their buildings, and one parent who was a fireman gave us great tours of the fire station. (The son of this fireman made one of our favorite childhood threats. Instead of the usual, "If you don't do what I say, my father will beat you up," he substituted, "My father will let your house burn down if it gets on fire!")

Occasionally, professional staff at the firm tried out new curriculum ideas and new teaching techniques with our children. The children were invited to paint a mural on a whole wall in a large room occupied by a Follow Through Project. However, the amount of interchange between adults outside the center and children within the center was not as great as we had hoped. It took constant prodding on our part to bring working adults and children together.

Our relations with the local schools and community were easier and more productive. We urged children to use the community. Trips to the parks and the library were frequent. Children certainly read more, and got to know better literature, as a result of this. Children who wanted to participate in sports at the Boys' Club, or to take music lessons, or to do errands for their parents were encouraged to do so. Children who were having trouble at school, either with learning or with discipline, were a special challenge. We found that we were often a catalyst for getting parents, teachers, and guidance counselors together to plan some consistent way of working with a child. We helped children with homework if the child or the parents requested this and a couple of children with learning disabilities were referred to us by the school system for extra help with reading or perceptual skills.

Thus far I have described the program which lasted for three years. I think it is fair to judge it as being rich, varied and based on the needs of the children. However, any evaluation of the program needs to consider the problems we experienced. What were they? For one thing, we had a problem keeping track of the children -- then again we often had a problem getting them to leave. Since we urged them to participate in the community, and to be independent, we almost invited these problems. Sometimes the children took off without telling us. One boy was finally traced to his home when he failed to appear at the center. He was making pancakes (something <u>we</u> had taught him to do) for two young friends! We kept a huge chart each week, that told us which children were going where and when, and whether they were allowed to go alone or needed someone to accompany them. We had to send staff out in two directions to the different schools to meet the kindergarteners and other young children who couldn't walk to the center alone. At closing time there were invariably children who didn't want to leave. It was fun to tease us and get more attention (in some homes supper time was not a very happy place)

and, of course, transitions are difficult for most people. After four hours of relating intensely to twenty-five children, we found this one of our more exasperating problems. We wanted to go home even if the children did not.

We had some children who appeared to be exhibiting close to delinquent behavior both in and out of the center. Sometimes we helped those children. Other times we just helped their parents or counselors. After an hour long conversation with one child's psychiatrist, for example, the psychiatrist remarked, "I don't know whether I've help you understand J. any better, but you have certainly helped me." Since he saw J. only one hour a week and we saw him every day after school, it is not surprising that we had a lot more information about J. than he did.

In the end it became clear that our greatest problem was that we were not loved and nurtured, except for a brief period at the start, by our sponsor. Foreign visitors, local educators and leaders from social agencies often gave us much encouragement and lots of tender loving care. The local Council for Children was supportive both financially and professionally. Research and development firms, no matter that the materials and documents they produce are for and about children, are not warm or friendly places to children or their caregivers. Their goal, as they reminded us again and again, was to bring in funds, not to provide services. When this became increasingly apparent we invited the parents to form a corporation and to take over the sponsorship and financing of a new center which we named Plowshares. The building in which it was housed was a handsome old brick building, so old that it was said to have been a storage place for gunpowder during the Civil War. We had not exactly turned our swords into plowshares, but we had transformed the use of the building from housing deadly explosives to providing a space for children to play and grow.*

It is clear that we have a long way to go before we can persuade most businesses to allow time for child/adult interaction at any place other than home, and then often only in the most limited way. While I was trying to bring about opportunities for young and old to get together, my own three young children, in another part of the same city, were being deprived of a father at supper, because a large local university insisted he teach education courses three evenings a week. It appears that the very people who are writing and lecturing about children are often too busy to be with them.

It will be a long time before communities and working places will actively seek imaginative ways to fit in children. Consequently, children, for the most part, have no better occupation than to stay on the streets or in parks with limited, sterile equipment, or watch TV, or get into trouble. Trouble, as we all know, comes as an invitation to children when there are not enough appealing, productive things to do from which they can gain recognition and satisfaction.

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*The program continued in the industrial park for another year. It is now operating in a public school in the same city.

Perhaps after-school caregivers can show communities the way. Persons planning programs should insist on sites that children can manage -- warehouse rooms, adventure playgrounds, schoolrooms that are not overly controlled by administrative or maintenance staff, churchrooms that are not controlled by persons who spend only an hour or two in the building on Sundays. Businesses and apartment complexes need to be forced to provide good space for children of all ages, and as Bronfenbrenner suggested almost a decade ago, "nothing more radical than providing a setting in which young and old can simply sit and talk . . ." I expect that he would agree that in addition to providing the setting, we need to allow adults some time to use it.

The US government has just spent millions of dollars studying the appropriate teacher/pupil ratio and class size for day care centers. It appears more millions may be spent to study Child Care Information and Referral Centers thoughout the nation. These Information Centers, like the Research Centers and the Colleges of Education, will publish directories, make phone calls, provide consultation about children, but rarely, if ever, relate to them directly. The staff of such centers will be concerned with cost efficiency and proposals for funding. Establishing the best programs for children may be of only minor importance.

We have had child labor laws in the USA for a good many years. We do not put children in factories in dangerous situations any more nor do we send them into coal mines. Rather, we appear to use them in a more subtle capacity. Their very existence makes jobs for adults, who then do not have time to be with them. Thus, the children must find their way through a profusion of ridiculous TV programs or a maze of often dangerous streets, or if they are fortunate, spend their afternoons in day care programs. Some of these will be so restricted by distant adults that the children's basic developmental needs will not be considered.

If this situation is to change, more government funding must go directly to day care services, where the kids themselves have shown us how to use it. If twenty-five kids can find "Paradise" in an old warehouse with some adults who take time to talk with them, then it is indeed possible to provide good quality day care for a reasonable expenditure of funds. The key requirement is that programs be based on the realities of children's lives--governed not by the dictates of distant "sponsors" but by the needs and ideas of the children involved.

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